

## ZERO TOLERANCE:

### Canada is Creating its Own Brand of Refugee

The four squeegee kids were huddled together in a corner of the ATM shelter, the rain poured outside on Winnipeg's Portage Avenue -- one moved and his squeegee was visible. Looking closer, their unique hairstyles were apparent -- they were real squeegee punks, no doubt about it.

Braving the rain and dashing across Portage Avenue, I asked one of them, "May I interview you tomorrow?"

The girl turned to a boy next to her and prodded him.

"Yes, I can speak English," he said, with a thick accent. "Here's my number, call around one o'clock," I said.

#### The Kids from Montreal

Flint called the next day and we met at a donut shop across from the ATM shelter they slept in. There were two couples: Flint and Mimi, and Spike and Candy. Flint, who acted as interpreter, was the youngest at 17, the other three were 18 years old and they were all from Montreal or surrounding environs.

They looked out of place indoors -- green and red mohawk hairstyles, rings in every part of their bodies -- zippers, chains, studs and lots of leather.

The kids seemed apprehensive. "Why do you want our story?" Candy asked.

Relating how I would secretly sneak into Saint Patrick's High School as a child and sleep in the nurses office seemed to help. Every night I would take out a window frame and crawl in. The home life I lived was so bad, living secretly in my high school was a better alternative. Hot dogs from the bingo halls freezer were my regular fare and bags of chips helped bolster my nutritional intake. It was washed down with canned pop. It certainly wasn't the Hyatt, but life at home was intolerable. Incredibly, this was home for more than a year.

"Let's start with your childhoods. You first Flint."

"My parents divorced when I was very young," Flint said, "My dad lives in Florida, my mom in Sorel, near Montreal. After dad left, stealing cars became a hobby. Been in and out of juvee since then. I'm looking forward to my eight-

teenth birthday when my juvee record will be annulled -- that's how the system works in Quebec. I want a fresh chance," Flint said.

"Called dad at Easter -- he was happy to hear from me. Mom hung up when I called.

#### KIDS LIKE THESE ARE FACING A REFUGEE-LIKE LIFE IN CANADA



### BY RODNEY GRAHAM

"You ready Mimi?" She was quietly listening, sipping her cup of tea.

"My parents are assholes," she said bitterly, "they would freak out even if I just slept over at a friend's house. They said to me, 'it's our way or the highway,' so I took the highway. I don't want to talk about those assholes anymore," she said.

"Spike?"

"My parents kicked me out when I was fourteen. I did a robbery and did nine months -- I was lucky to get only that. Yea, sure, I was rebellious but they were far too strict though. Don't know my real father -- saw him last when I was four. Mom and dad were always beating the hell out of each other. My real dad is an alcoholic -- he never once wished me happy birthday in my life. My step-dad told me to 'get out' and that I was not his son. I left.

Candy's story was the most touching. Not what she said -- it was what she didn't say.

"When just a child, mother would beat me for the slightest reason -- she had a problem with anger," Candy said, "when thirteen years of age mom beat me so severely, I ran away from home. Being put into the 'Department De La Protection De La Jeunesse' -- The Department for the Protection of Young Persons, was the next step. It was horrible. I don't know my dad. I met him once at age sixteen, don't want to see him again. He's an alcoholic, he never came to visit me once when I was growing up even though he knew where to find me. After calling mom at Easter -- she just said, 'stop taking drugs.' "I went to work on a farm near the American border, it was owned by an uncle," she said. "How was that?"

"It was o.k. I guess..." she trailed off ... her face became pale, ashen, she looked down at the floor ...

"What's wrong?" I asked, patiently. She said something in French.

"She doesn't want to talk anymore," Flint answered. Candy gazed at the floor with a thousand yard stare -- she was clearly shaken. Mimi moved over and sat with her, she hugged her.

Our Voice writer Rodney Graham has been following and writing about Canada's Squeegee Kids for the last two years. This has been part one of his personal account of his interactions and research involving these kids. Parts two and three will follow in the coming months.

September 1998 Vol. 5 No. 9  
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# Our Voice

## the spare change magazine

Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson  
Tell the story of a  
**Stolen Life**



**LITERACY**  
The importance of reading.  
See back cover.

# Our Voice

**Publishers:**  
Bissell Centre, Edmonton  
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**Managing Editor**  
Michael Walters

**Design and Production**  
Keith Wiley

**428-4001 in  
Edmonton**

**1-888-428-4001**

**Editorial Offices and  
Edmonton Distribution at:**  
Bissell Centre  
10527-96 Street • Edmonton •  
T5H 2H6  
Phone: 428-4001 • Fax: 497-7077

**Calgary Our Voice Office**  
Phone: 508-9050 Fax: 508-9051

Office at the Calgary Native  
Friendship Centre • 140-2nd  
Avenue SW • Calgary, AB •  
T2P 0B9

**EMAIL:**  
sparechg@freenet.edmonton.ab.ca

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ent society we tend to  
ignore the lives of the less  
fortunate, while devoting  
the majority of media  
attention towards the 'con-  
cerns' of the well-off. If you  
pick up your morning  
paper and leaf through it,  
you will find on the front  
page - local news of impor-  
tance, and world news of  
importance. The first few  
pages will print news  
regarding politicians,  
celebrities, and business-  
men. But any news there  
might be about the plight  
of the 'less fortunate' is usu-  
ally buried, way back  
somewhere near the  
sports section.

A recent news  
release through  
Reuters told of the  
increase in the phe-  
nomenon of "air rage"-  
a phenomenon in  
which pampered pas-  
sengers 'flip out' and  
cause a scene during a  
plane flight. Perhaps  
their coffee is not hot,  
or the stewardess for-  
got to put ice in their  
drink, or, "You lost my  
gucci bag, I'll file a  
complaint through  
my lawyer! You'll be  
fired - what's your  
name!" Often the trav-  
eller will push, grab,  
or even punch a stew-  
ardess or steward.

Another issue that  
the well-off (healthy  
working people and  
middle, and upper  
class), are increasingly  
complaining about are  
traffic tickets - we  
spend millions of dol-  
lars a year maintain-  
ing a special court  
where people can dis-  
pute their tickets.

The average car  
owner spends seven  
hundred dollars a year  
in automobile up-  
keep. Increasingly we  
hear reports of protest  
at the high rate  
charged to fix the pol-  
lution spewing machines. This complaint  
does not stop most people from owning  
more than two however.

The well-off, "fatn' sassy" of our nation  
complain about bike riders, squeegee kids,  
and speed-bumps. A recent report in  
Winnipeg even told of how people in the  
'snob hills' district were issuing complaints  
about 'tinkle bells' of the little ice cream  
carts too annoying - too loud, apparently,  
for the sensitive well-to-do.

**RODNEY RANTS...**

## The Good, the Bad, and the Inconvenienced ...

By Rodney Graham



she is moving -again. The build-  
ing she lived in was cockroach  
infested. The last time she had to  
move it was because her neigh-  
bors were scary, she has to have a  
safe place for her son to live. Her  
mode of transport is by foot,  
because she can't afford a car --  
not even a cheap one. As a single  
parent mother on assistance, she  
can only afford housing where  
high crime rates and poorly man-  
aged buildings necessitate fre-  
quent moves. Many others like  
Anna migrate from slum-like  
buildings, using shopping carts to  
transport their meager belong-  
ings.

Poverty produces a vicious circle  
of frustrated activity, the  
parameters of which are  
strictly regimented by the  
government bureaucrats  
who go home to comfort-  
able middle class homes  
and enjoy comparatively  
rewarding benefits.

Anna and her young son  
can only dream of travel-  
ing to exotic locations; of

**MOVING DAY:**  
*Don't you hate it  
when you don't  
have a car on  
moving day. Anna  
Hanske and her  
son do.*

**PARKING  
TICKET:**  
*Don't you just  
hate to get one.  
Lots of people do.  
They'll go to  
court!*

sipping on coconuts under  
palm trees, and gazing out  
at turquoise blue seas.

**Small Inconveniences**  
When you feel tempted to  
slam the screen door on the  
door-to-door canvasser - or  
complain about the 'tinkle  
bells' of the ice cream cart,

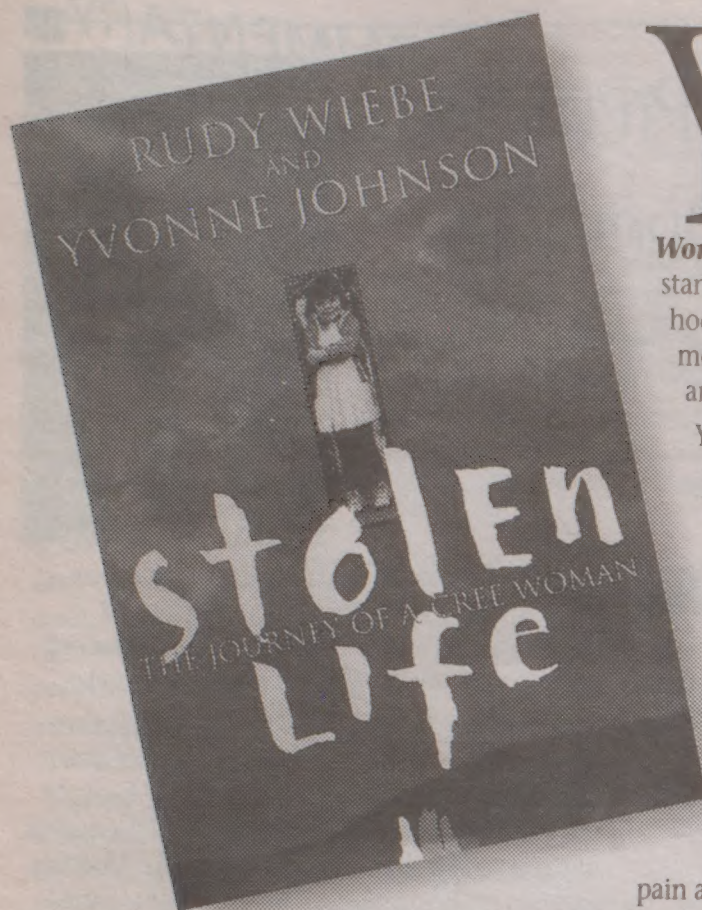
when you are tempted to scold the wait-  
ress because your cappuccino is not per-  
fect, when a youth asks if he can wash  
your windshield, or when your mode of  
transport isn't as 'convenient' as it is sup-  
posed to be - remember Anna and her  
friends.

Our society in North America should  
adopt the attitude - 'to comfort the afflict-  
ed, and afflict the comfortable' - as it is  
now, we comfort the comfortable, and  
afflict those already afflicted. ♦

These individuals would be busy com-  
plaining if they had to live in Mexico, or  
South American countries where poor  
people are everywhere selling trinkets,  
washing windshields on many highways  
and streets. And in China, where just  
about everyone rides a bike, they would be  
quite flustered indeed.

### The Inconvenience of the Marginalized

Anna Hanska is a single parent mother  
in Winnipeg living in the core area. Today



**Y**vonne Johnson is serving a life sentence for her role in the 1991 Wetaskiwin murder of "Chuck" Leonard Charles Skwarok, a man she suspected of being a child molester. Now she is the co-author of **Stolen Life, The Journey of a Cree Woman**.

The book, she says, is an attempt to understand her present situation as it relates to her childhood of sexual abuse, poverty, the physical and mental anguish of being born with a cleft palate and the stinging taunts of racism.

Yvonne co-authored the book with Rudy Wiebe, winner of the Governor General's Award for his book **The Temptation of Big Bear**. Big Bear, Yvonne's great-great grandfather, a Cree leader, was imprisoned for his rebellion against the Canadian government. It was Wiebe's authorship of that book that first led Johnson to him. Their relationship developed as a friendship. Yvonne had been writing down memories of her life journey as part of a healing process. The writing was also an attempt to explain herself in the event that she could no longer cope with her

pain and would be driven to suicide, as have many women who served time at the former Kingston Prison for Women.

As her memories unfolded she shared them with Rudy and together they wrote the book **Stolen Life**. One of her purposes in writing the book was to let others who have suffered abuse know that they are not alone in their pain.

"I needed to explore the dynamics of abuse, objectify them from the outside," said

Yvonne in a recent joint interview with herself and Rudy Wiebe.

Yvonne Johnson's story puts a face on statistics.

In **Stolen Life** she recounts how she was the victim of incest, rape at the hands of people known to her family and also

acquaintance rape. Many women in prison have

been victims of sexual abuse.

According to statistics gathered by the Elizabeth Fry Society, an advocacy group for former female inmates, 72 per cent of provincially-sentenced women, 82 per cent of federally-sentenced women and 90 per cent of federally-sentenced First Nations women have histories of physical and/or sexual abuse. Many of the women also have extremely high rates of childhood sexual abuse and it is more commonly incestuous, violent and extended over a long period of time with multiple perpetrators.

Forty-three per cent of federally sentenced women have substance abuse or addiction problems. Sixty-nine per cent have indicated that drugs or alcohol

directly played a major role in their offense or offending history. This was Yvonne's situation, too. In the book she explores the role that alcohol played in her life, culminating in the death of Chuck Skwarok.

Recalling her experiences in the book has been very painful for Yvonne, but she says it has been an essential and necessary part of her healing. She has spent time reading the works of Karl Jung and says she is seeking what he describes as "an ego that can endure the truth".

"We must ask ourselves why are so many disadvantaged people, such as Natives and the poor, are over-represented in prisons," Rudy Wiebe, told Our Voice. He pointed out that juries are supposed to be made up of "people's peers." But the people who are sitting on juries do not always represent the peers of the accused. Those who sat on the jury at Yvonne's trial were all white- nine males, three women, mostly farmers and business people.

The book also examines wider issues affecting Yvonne's life and the lives of native people - issues like residential schools, foster care, adoption into white families and the chaos created by the introduction of alcohol into native communities. Yvonne's mother was educated in a residential school. The book discusses how this affected her life and ultimately affected Yvonne.

Early in her story Yvonne recounts how when she was young her brother, Earl, died under suspicious circumstances while in the custody of the Butte, Montana police. Years later the same officers were convicted of criminal offences while they were members of the force. Her brother's death strongly affected Yvonne and her family, especially her mother who went into a clinical depression.

And then Yvonne ran into the law. A key question raised by the book is the severity of the conviction and sentence she received in comparison with relatively lighter sentences for others involved with the crime. Her cousin Shirley Ann struck a deal to testify against Yvonne. Shirley Anne got off much more lightly. Today, Yvonne says she bears her cousin no malice. "First comes logic, then reality, then love," she says.

The book makes it clear that when any group in society is diminished, all of us are diminished because we are deprived of the full extent of the contributions that they can make.

"It is time for us to face together the issues affecting Native people or we may have to face the consequences of our ignorance," says Yvonne. "We should be proud of our native people for their grace, beauty and spirituality."

Canadians, Rudy says, "parade ourselves" in the world as being champions of human rights. But we must face up to the horrors inflicted upon the aboriginal peoples of this continent. For the sake of future generations we must set aside our indignation at being

blamed for the sins of our ancestors and lend support to the First Nations in their quest for renewal.

Yvonne Johnson is currently at the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge for Native Women in Saskatchewan. She is eligible for parole in the year 2014. She does not ask for pity or forgiveness from society. She only asks for understanding. She hopes that recording her story may help others who are hurting. ♦

# Writing her way to an understanding of a tortured life

Yvonne Johnson co-authors her story with Rudy Wiebe

**Stolen Life - The Journey of a Cree Woman**  
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Interview by L. Janet Dowling



Yvonne Johnson today. PHOTO: Judi Hardie  
Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne. PHOTO: Louise



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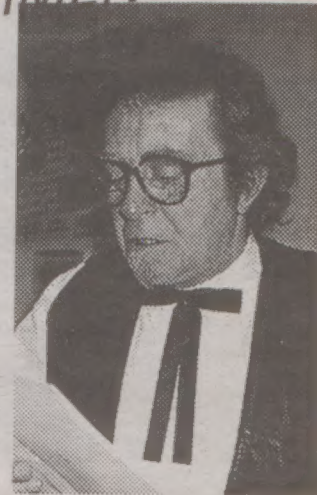


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## COMMENTARY

# Tom Hind on the Premier's answers to Ten Questions



In the June edition of **Our Voice** we took ten tough questions from people living on or close to the streets and sent these questions to Premier Klein's office.

In response to Mr. Klein's answers we have asked a number of people to comment on all or some of the answers. This issue we have a comment by Tom Hind, a freelance writer who lives in Edmonton's inner city.

BY TOM HIND

It is a mistake to send poor people to Premier Klein for a chat on local states of poverty. Hard questions to Klein reap weak, governmentese-style answers.

When invited to come to the inner city to see the levels of poverty rampant on the streets, he evaded the invitation by saying, "I have an opportunity to visit inner city areas in our province and I've seen the complex issues facing homeless people." Now, what kind of double speak is this I ask. It's not "I've taken the opportunity to view things for myself and get to know what they are about first hand" or "I will avail myself to come to your community and see the particular problems the poor and homeless face on the streets."

Colliding visions seem to be the focus of the interview. Nowhere in the article is there any real grasp that Klein is listening to the questions being posed by the people. Standardized general answers seem to be his forte. Sanitized answers about what he has done for the economy, the health system, and the education system.

Well Mr. Klein, just what have you done for the economy? And which economy are we talking about? The one for the rich? Or the one for the poor? - the one that doesn't allow a single person or poverty level family to make enough money to live on. The minimum wage is still appallingly low. It is increasing, but will still be one of the lowest in the country. If Alberta is so rich, why is there such a large section of the population living in poverty, depending on food banks and churches for their sustenance as the government cheats out on them?

It is true Mr. Klein. You have shaken up the province with your get tough, money deployment schemes. But in the course of dealing with social issues over the last three years, you have piled away billions made from lotteries, surcharges, and hidden taxes into government coffers. Thousands of Albertans have been severely

hurt from get tough social policies invoked on them; social policies that lack empathy and understanding and benignly keep people locked into poverty-syndromes and poverty life styles.

We are not America Mr. Premier. Attempts to Americanize our so called social safety net can only defeat the purpose of the structure being in place in the first place. Food banks and thousands of street people do not sound to me like Alberta's excesses are being plugged into the right, corrective holes in the current system. Why is not a larger portion of provincial monies not assigned to realistic approaches to "fixing" the problems within the current welfare system?

The chop logic at work here defies rationalization. The poor are kept that way with unjust labour laws (non-union shops) and a minimum wage that cannot keep pace with yearly inflation rates. No equity among classes is at work here. Do welfare cheques go up to offset inflations in food and housing costs? No. Only the richer sectors get this shelter. The poor are forced to do more with less.

Anyway Mr. Premier, you are not speaking to the questions you are being asked. It seems that rather than attempt to answer their gut-level questions with your gut, you have trivialized them with your lack of sensitive understanding and ridiculed them with your government language.

Poverty will never be eradicated by tough policy and it will not go away by itself. The whole poor schemata screams out for an infusion of dollars to be pumped into the welfare system. The way the system is now is nothing to be proud of. It is but a skeleton of what a socially fair system should look like. But here again, we get back to the real culprits. They are the caste-like class divisions, and ambivalent attitudes toward the poor and their plights, by those who command the social and work force systems.

So if you say you're really listening Mr. Klein, then let's see some better evidence of that. Or are you only listening to the upper classes and the money maker shakers in the province? ♦



Talking  
Back

TELL US WHAT YOU THINK.

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## Dumping one of the best parts of Our Voice?

I just phoned to say how disappointed I am to learn that you're dumping Paul Sussman's column. It's one of the reasons I bought the newspaper and I'm really disappointed you're getting rid

of it. I can't believe it. It was one of the best aspects of it. Obviously you don't care too much about some of your readers.

-A reader.

# Do we fight or do we manage?

This question was posed to me recently. Does your publication believe in fighting poverty or does it believe in managing poverty? You know... keeping poverty in sight and informing people of its realities, but not really doing anything about it. That is a tough question. My initial response to the question is that, even if we are simply informing people of the realities of poverty, that in itself is an important step toward fighting poverty. No one will deny the effects of education. But is that only one of the necessary steps toward eradicating a social disease that has plagued our communities for as long as we can remember. Maybe that's our answer. The fact that there have always been people living very poor lives, people living homeless and hungry in a world of plenty. I guess that would tell us that we're not doing enough or not doing the right things.

So what can we do? Who can we blame for the problems that persist in our society? How, after all of this time, can we make things better? In my experience, the most common answer to these questions that I've heard is that there's really nothing we can do. Ultimately the responsibility falls to the people who are poor. It's their problem. Maybe if they'd get off their asses, maybe if they'd quit drinking everything would be better. Yeah well maybe, but that's always been the easy way for people to look at poverty, so for the sake of this argument I will not blame the poor for their problems. It has never been as simple as people being just plain lazy. It's a bigger hand than that.

Where do we look for the answers? How about those working in the area of poverty, the inner city and the human service agencies, entities such as Our Voice for example? Are they doing enough to fight poverty? How are they working together or how are they working against each other? Do different philosophies and convoluted mandates prevent agencies from focusing on the issues of poverty and working together? Do these agencies have different views of what hard-core poverty is?

If we were to examine these questions a bit we can say that working in the inner city or working in social service jobs is not an easy way to make a living. I can see the fatigue of my peers at the end of a day. They have expressions that say "I can't possibly give anymore." It's a heavy trip working in this area and there is a high burn out rate among people who do. It isn't easy. Perhaps there needs to be more people working at fighting poverty to support those who are now trying. Maybe more has to be done to help those people working every day with the poor. In this case we need to look at the leaders of these agencies and projects. Are they doing enough? How does this magazine help to get people out of impoverished lives. I guess we give our vendors a means to an income, a bit of money, but they are still poor. We can't deny that. Are we and others looking in the right directions? Well often what we are able to do is extremely limited. Funding is always an issue. Money is tight. Where there is poverty, there is little money of course.

An interesting fact however, is that there is enough money in the world, if it were to be evenly redistributed, every single person would be wealthy. So where is all of this money? A very small percentage of the population is rich and a very large percentage is poor. Why?

The government? For the past century, in this country specifically, we have watched governments give and give to the rich. Though every time governments inform us that we've spent too much money, it's always the little people who get taken from to make up for this overspending. We've been letting it happen for years. We criticize it, opposition groups condemn it, but does anybody really ever do anything about it? Is there anything that we can do about it? Are we able to fight the government and the rich? Is there a way for us to be more active in this fight? How much power do we have? How much will do we have? Or maybe we should accept things how they are and deal with what we can?

As things get worse it does get harder to fight, but as things get worse do we have more reason to fight?

These are all questions that we at this magazine, those who work with people in poverty and society in general must ask.

Michael Walters

## Editorial OPINION

# Our Voice

the spare change magazine

## It's a written world out there

Perhaps one of the toughest handicaps that holds people in poverty today is completely invisible. You can't tell by looking at a person whether they can read or not. But if you are one of those who have trouble with the written word you soon find a lot of doors close pretty quickly. Even welfare, which should be there to assist the most vulnerable, can be a tough proposition if you have trouble reading through the rules, regulations, and requirements. Many people who really need the assistance say they just can't be bothered with it. It's quite a hassle jumping through all those hoops, especially if you have trouble reading them to begin with.

And if you thought that was bad just try reading a software manual, a challenging task for many university graduates.

Nearly one in six Canadians has reading skills that are too limited to allow them to deal with the majority of written material encountered in everyday life. Some twenty two per cent have difficulty reading a good deal of what they need. One in five of us is not reading this magazine. In fact they are not at home in what has become a very text-oriented world.

Get it together folks, get with the program and learn to read, many people might say. That's a pretty easy way out, to blame the folks themselves for their problems. There are a great number of literacy programs out there. These are programs that strive hard to be accessible, affordable if not free, and helpful to people at whatever level. But, try as they might they won't reach everyone, and they won't be able to help everyone.

ABC Canada, one literacy program, has a slightly different suggestion that puts the shoe on the other foot: write more clearly. That's right, most printed material could be made much easier to understand (this column excepted, of course). This is a very different approach, and one that is worth thinking about. Instead of insisting that everyone "get with the program" why not make "the program" get with the people.

What about making a society that works for all of us, serves people in their needs at their levels. While we want to encourage literacy for everyone, it's not going to happen, not overnight and not ever. We need to make a world that works for all the people who are not as engrossed with printed language as some of us are.

There's an overwhelming belief out there that it's up to individuals to keep

up with the technology and changes that society comes up with. What about looking at it the other way and come up with a society, welfare systems would be a good starting point, that works for people where they are at.

The legal profession worked out its system, creating an almost secret language that, more than anything else, protects their profession and their income. Unless we look at how our society works, and question the assumption that everyone should become well-educated or its their own fault, we are heading towards creating an underclass of people, nearly one fifth of us, who just will not be able to enjoy life in society like the others.

Keith Wiley

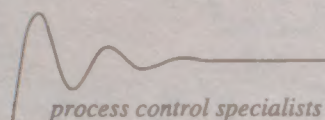


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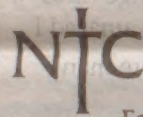
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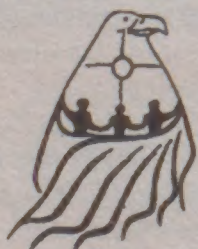


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# The Movement Keeps Moving Montreal hosts street magazines from North America

"I used my fellowship money for med school to start *Homeless Whispers*, the rest came from my own pocket. Now finally we have enough ads to pay for the printing," says Corey Hardin from Champagne, Illinois. Champagne is a city of about seventy thousand people. "We don't have vendors yet, but we have some guys who are interested and some of the people from the shelter in town who are hopefully going to do the writing."

Corey was one of the more than forty delegates from Canada, the U.S and Europe who went to Montreal this past August to talk about their street publications and to talk about the street paper movement.

"It's become very strong. It's an important way of getting the message and the voice of the poor and homeless out to the general public. Street publications act as extremely important tools when it comes to fighting and dealing with poverty," says Tim Harris, director of *Real Change Magazine* in Seattle and also the Chair of the North American Street News Association (NASNA).

One of the issues raised at this year's conference is exactly what kind of tool a street publication should be in the fight against poverty. Should they be a voice for the poor, or should they be instruments of commercial value that will put much needed money into the pockets of those who live in poverty.

John Bird, the Publisher of *The Big Issue* in London, England claims the money the publications make for the vendors is what's important.

"We started *The Big Issue* to lift homeless people out of the criminal gender that they had been placed in. We wanted to give them an alternative to panhandling. However I would not produce a paper that's exclusively about homelessness by homeless people. I wouldn't do that because I'm not interested in that. I wanted to make a commercial product that would get people off the streets, that would stop them from selling their bodies. I'm much more interested in getting people off the streets than I am in representing them while they are on the streets."

*The Big Issue* has a weekly circulation of four million copies in England. As well as being sold in thirty-five cities in the U.K., separate editions are sold in Ireland, Scotland, Australia, South Africa and Los Angeles. It is the most successful street publication in terms of getting people off the streets.

The other side of the argument is that it is the commercial way of thinking that leaves so many people homeless in our world.

"We have to support and give our resources to the people who need these papers. We have to represent them and be a voice for them. That is what is important. It's important that we work together to change attitudes and the best way to do that is to educate through the experiences of the people who live on the streets, the people who are poor," says

Jennifer Waggoner, Editor of *Making Change* in Santa Monica, California. "These endeavors aren't about commercial success, they're about helping people."

None of the American publications at the conference bore any resemblance to *The Big Issue*. Most street publications operate on a shoe-string budget and struggle from month-to-month to survive. There were publications that were started by homeless people, continue to be operated by homeless people and are about homeless people. Angelo Anderson was homeless when he started *The Homeless Grapevine* in Cleveland, Ohio five years

ago. It began as a single sheet of paper and now publishes 16 pages monthly.

There are magazines that are put together by professionals through

agencies aimed at working with those who live in poverty. *Street Wise* in Chicago is one of the most effective and professionally-run publications.

"I focus a lot on quality, quality of the lay-

out, quality of the writing. We're trying to make it an easier sell for our vendors. In Chicago the public who the vendors are selling to seem to demand high quality. We employ four professional writers. We try to write from the perspective of the impoverished or the at-risk. We focus on why people are poor and homeless. We cover politics, the economics the policies that put people at risk. We do a lot of research into these kinds of things," says Jalyene Strong, the *Street Wise* editor.

Probably the most notable representation at the conference was the number of small publications being produced by very young people. Young people in their early twenties were going out and recruiting vendors, writing stories about poverty and producing magazines that are of interest to a broader public.

"It's great. It's really important that the youth join this movement. They are the future and it's up to the association to ensure that they succeed in their efforts. The more voice we have in our fight the more effective we will be. The street paper movement is crucial to fighting poverty and with more and more young people coming aboard it only means good things for what we need to accomplish and that's to get rid of homelessness and poverty," say Michael Stoops, from the National Coalition for the Homeless in the U.S. and a founding member of NASNA.

Next year's conference is to be hosted by Angelo and his newspaper in Cleveland, Ohio. ♦

Michael Walters, story and photos.

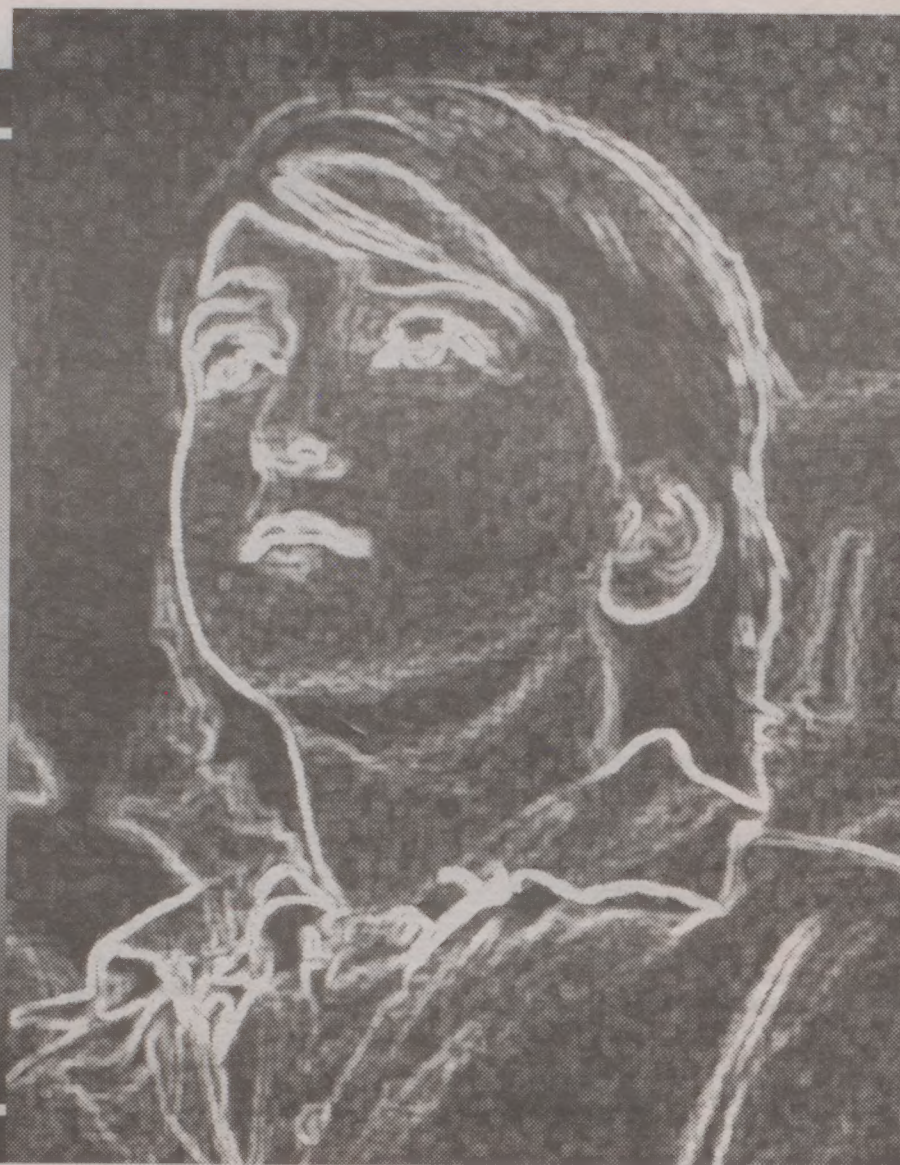


TOP: Montreal Homeless Chorus singing at the NASNA Conference. ABOVE: Chuck Currie, Oregon, and Corey Hardin, Illinois. RIGHT: Tim Harris, chair of NASNA.



# *I would cry through the long night*

One woman's story of despair and recovery



**AS** a child I would cry through the long night and wonder why "Daddy" would hurt me. I wondered why, everyday, everyone would call me a dirty little Indian. My parents were white and I knew I was different. I was the only one in my family with dark hair and dark eyes.

When I was seven years old, Daddy would come to my room to let me know how much he loved me. Other members of the family would visit me sometimes too. I was afraid to tell anyone because if I did, I thought Daddy and everyone else would stop loving me. All I wanted was someone to love me.

As I got older the abuse continued at home and also started at school. In school I was called a bastard child which I couldn't understand because I had parents. It was at school where I discovered that I was adopted. I asked my mother what that meant. She said "that my mother didn't want me so she put me in an orphanage". She also said they felt sorry for me so they adopted me. It was then I swore that nobody would feel sorry for me again.

I started drinking when I was twelve years old. I discovered that it helped at times to ease the loneliness and the abuse at home and at school. Overnight I changed. I wasn't a timid shy person any longer. I became very aggressive and a very angry person. Eventually I was expelled from school.

I got married when I was nineteen, thinking that marriage would solve my problems. Little did I know. I turned out to be an absolute nightmare. My drinking increased like you wouldn't believe. It was during the marriage that I tried to commit suicide three times. I had enough abuse. Enough was enough.

Because I wouldn't submit to my husband, both of my children are a result of rape. They are the only good and beautiful part of that relationship. When I divorced their father, it was a very hard decision to leave them. Also through the testimony of my parents

***I went back to the streets. I didn't want to live anymore. I wanted to die. As time went on, people on the streets were even starting to leave me. I'd never felt so alone. I had gone back to being the lonely child, crying in the corner of a dark room.***

and in-laws, plus my husband, I lost my children. I believed that at the time I wasn't well enough to look after them, but I would never call myself an unfit mother. I loved my children very much. During the marriage, my husband forced me into Alberta Hospital where I received sixteen shock treatments. During that time my mind went blank.

While in the hospital, for the first time in my life, I met three people who turned out to be friends. A doctor and two nurses. They treated me like a person. Finally I had true friends and someone to talk to.

But after my divorce in 1974, I decided that I would not let anyone hurt me ever again. I continued drinking and was then introduced to a world of drugs. I couldn't seem to have regard for any other person or their feelings. It was get-even time. My anger had become full blown. I had lost all respect for myself and had no respect for anyone else. I didn't care who I hurt or how I hurt them. I tried AA programs, but I'd always go home feeling like a failure. I truly believed that my parents and my teachers were right. I was stupid.

I went back to the streets. I didn't want to live anymore. I wanted to die. As time went on, people on the streets were even starting to leave me. I'd never felt so alone. I had gone back to being the lonely child, crying in the corner of a dark room.

I had to do something different. I was tired of jails, sleeping in boxes, river banks, picking up men. My body was even rejecting me. I couldn't find a place to inject my drugs anymore. I knew that if I didn't change I was going to die on the streets. I was amazed I was still alive as it was. There were many times I should have died. I was beaten so many times.

One day I crawled into the old Boyle Street Co-op in Edmonton and was lucky to meet a lady by the name of Mary Burly. She was able to plant the seed of hope into my life. I will always believe that. She talked about a better way of living and I managed to hear her. I carried that with me.

Then in 1980, I was as far down as I could ever go. I was laying on the ground with cops all around me. I was so scared and humiliated. I had never felt lower or more ashamed. I reached my hand out to God and started begging and pleading to him for help. I cried and knew I needed to do anything I could to change my life.

It was hard, but I have since gone to school and found that I am not stupid. I hold on to the hope that I don't have to be lonely anymore.

I have made the decision to let God into my life and it has helped me a lot. I have respect for myself and for others. I try to help others and give them the hope that was given to me. Life today isn't a dark lonely corner to cry in without love. My corners are bright and beautiful. Life has its ups and downs, but I see it now filled with laughter and bright light. I have faith, hope and love and am very thankful for being given another chance to start again, another chance to live. ♦

**Trapper**  
Trapper is a pseudonym for this woman who wanted her identity withheld because of the personal and revealing nature of her story.

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## Within Myself

As I walk on this road to nowhere  
and despair without a care whether  
I live or die not caring whether  
tomorrow comes.

Within myself I can cry  
Within myself I can laugh  
Within myself I am free to be me.

I ask many questions in life  
why this is and that is?  
Please can you heed my words  
and ease my pain?

Within myself I can see light  
Within myself I can see darkness  
Within myself I seek answers in life.

People I love come and go and I am  
still searching in life  
for the reasons I am still here and  
not dead.

Within myself I feel love  
Within myself I feel hate  
Within myself no one can hurt me.

by Greg Laboucan

## Don't Fear Me

One day I found you,  
had to walk ten miles in these  
worn out shoes.  
Found you by the river,  
saw your clothes drifting away -  
Naked.  
By the river you were  
unaware of my lust,  
as I resist my urge to jump you.  
Don't fear me.  
I only stare  
I only dream  
I do not touch  
I do not feel  
Don't fear me.  
I want to scream out your name  
I want to send my clothes down the river with yours.  
I don't make a sound.  
I only watch you stand  
listen to you breathe  
see your chest rise and  
fall with mine.  
Don't fear me.  
I do not touch  
I only look.  
I can feel you  
Don't fear me.

by Angela Glasel.

# Who sings for the poor? - Woody Guthrie now with Billy Bragg



BY KEITH WILEY

**W**ho sings for the poor? With concert tickets costing several days minimum wages, not many big name artists sing for the poor. You have your buskers and your church choirs... but... you could be out of luck. It wasn't always so, one of the world's most famous songwriters, Woody Guthrie sung mainly for and about ordinary and poor people. Woody Guthrie has been dead for years however, but recently he acquired a new song-writing partner who has revived some unknown Guthrie songs.

British rad-punk rocker Billy Bragg came to Alberta folk festivals recently, touring with his new album of Guthrie songs *Mermaid Avenue*.

"The Woody Guthrie you know and love is just five per cent of him," Bragg told a clutch of music writers who surrounded him at the Edmonton folk festival. "The 150 tunes he recorded on Folkways is just a small part." Bragg had the good fortune to be chosen by Woody Guthrie's daughter to put music to some more of the songs penned by the American icon. He was stunned by the amount of material Woody Guthrie had written, two songs a week for years. Bragg says it just had to come out of him. Guthrie had moved his family to New York from his roots in Oklahoma and California, and in the big city he penned many, many lyrics.

"Woody's daughter Nora Guthrie approached me in the spring of 1995 with the idea of writing some new music to accompany these lost songs. She runs the Woody Guthrie archive in New York city and offered me access to over a thousand complete lyrics of her father's that are in her care."

Now he says, Woody Guthrie "has not made his last album yet."

It might seem odd that Bragg, a British punk rocker, would be recording new songs from the American corner stone of folk music. But Bragg says it's not that far a reach. He feels quite connected to Woody, whose most memorable songs came out of the Depression-era poverty of the 1930s. "There were similarities between the 80's in England and the 30's in America," says Bragg. "There wasn't the war, but the poverty was there, and the radicalism was there." Bragg has made his career singing songs for what he would call "the working classes" with radical anthems and political songs. But, he points out that neither he nor Guthrie "were Marxist or ideologues. We learned it from observing."

And music for Bragg "is about communicating

ideas, about articulating what we believe in." Bragg said he was attracted to working on the project because, "there aren't many of us who sing about unions and have a sense of humour about us and our environment."

When picking out songs, Bragg chose some about unions, a topic close to both his and Woody's heart, but most of the songs on *Mermaid Avenue* are not much about politics, if you don't count the humorous *Jesus Christ for President*. "I chose songs that did not reflect the legend of Woody Guthrie." "Why do we need more songs like *This Land is your Land*?" he asks. He ended up with what he calls the "earthy and lustful" side of Woody Guthrie, and "some of the most explicitly sexual lyrics I've ever seen." They range from fantasies about actress Ingrid Bergman, apparently one of Woody Guthrie's obsessions, to a song that Bragg explained to the Folk Festival crowd was about a night on the town in New York, and meeting up with a woman.

Don't expect Billy Bragg's Guthrie songs to sound like guitar-strumming folk, though. While he was working with Guthrie lyrics, Bragg still had his music to put into it. "It had to have a contemporary edge to it. We weren't just doing a Woody Guthrie album, it was a collaborative effort."

He chose the American band Wilco to write and record the music with because, he says, "I needed a rock band that could play ballads."

The result is certainly not old-fashioned Woody Guthrie, but it is a musically exciting sound.

The title of the new recording is all Guthrie, though. *Mermaid Avenue* is the name of the street in Coney Island, Brooklyn, that was home to Woody Guthrie and his wife, Marjorie and their kids in the years that followed World War II. Incapacitated by Lou Gehrig's disease, Guthrie lived out his life an invalid, writing songs until he could no longer hold a pencil. He died in 1967.

But Billy Bragg, Guthrie's newest collaborator, is still kicking. Besides *Mermaid Avenue*, he says there's another full CD worth of Guthrie songs "in the can" already recorded.

And Bragg isn't giving up his and Guthrie's roots about singing for the poor. Guthrie's folk is "do-it-yourself music, that music survives, it's where all the good music comes from," says Bragg. And Billy Bragg continues to be political, advocating for poor people. As he says: "We don't have to give up. We don't have to be cynical." ♦

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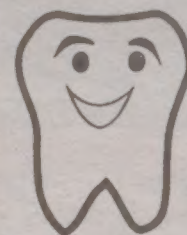
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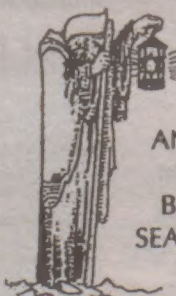
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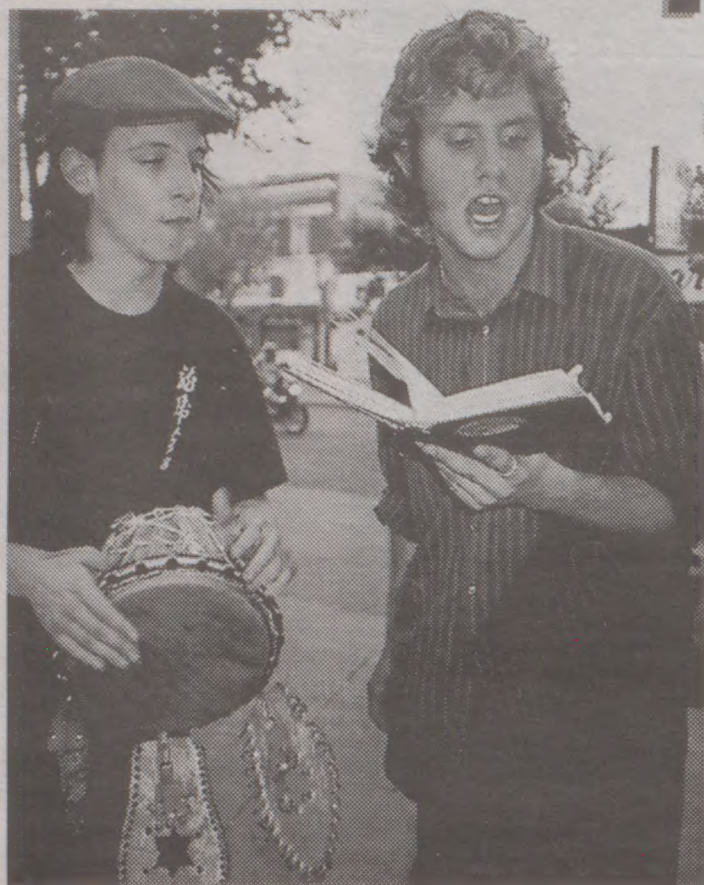
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## JOHN'S STYLE FILE

### Kevin Solez and Joe Nuemann

Joe on the left, Kevin on the right.

John Zapantis  
Our Voice vendor,  
writer and  
photographer meets  
the most  
interesting people.



"Reading poetry on the street is a great mechanism toward writing poetry. You meet so many cool people and you're exposed to all sorts of stuff. You see it all go down," says Kevin Solez.

Kevin, the poet along with partner and Djembe player Joe Nuemann occasionally combine forces to give Whyte Avenue the sounds of beat poetry. They have been performing together since January of 1997.

They'll both tell you that the money they make busking is secondary to their love of performing in front of other people. That's their ultimate high.

"It's great performing out here," says Joe. "This is the best part of town. People who come here are usually so open minded."

"What's the most effective solution when dealing with the ignorance of passer-byes on Whyte Avenue," Our Voice asked the duo.

"We just throw it right back at them. There's no reason to get violent or angry. Just don't give them the time of day," says Kevin.

Beat poetry for Kevin is his appropriate means of expression.

"It's a great release I think. It's my ideal way of expressing myself. I feel that, of any form of art, I can get it out best with words," says Kevin.

"Busking is like a release. You can always block out the audience while playing, you know get into, cope with the stress of life, be free." Joe adds. ♦

## Thanks to loyal readers who did survey

There were over 60 people who sent in the Our Voice survey over the last couple of months. It made for a successful survey that gives us a pretty good picture of "loyal readers", people who care enough to take the time to give us the feedback. The overall positive nature of the responses suggests that the survey gives us a good indication of what people like about the paper, and what inspires loyal buyers to buy it. It does NOT indicate why others may not buy the magazine, or what the turn-offs are.

The first purpose of publishing Our Voice is to provide a good, saleable product for the vendors who need something good to sell. Letting us know what you like really helps with that.

One interesting result was that most of those who responded say they only buy one copy each month. So although they almost all agreed with the many reasons for buying the magazine, Question 1, they tend only to buy one copy. That suggests they mainly buy it to read it. The fact that many mentioned recent articles, also suggests they read it, and buy it to read it.

They overwhelmingly agree that Our Voice is fair and informative and educational. The respondents tend to be mainly women, 66%. They are largely well-educated, professionals 54% College or University Education and they are financially secure: 65% Not concerned or saving money.

Many readers suggested they did not much appreciate the humorous News of the World column, which has been in the publication since the beginning. We decided to drop the column, and as you may read on page four, at least one loyal reader is NOT pleased.

Thank you to all of you who took the time to respond. It really helps.

## And the prize winners

Special prizes of CDs, and great stuff contributed by CKUA Radio Network go to three survey respondents. Thank you and congratulations to:

Donna Stanyer  
Brenda Manasse  
J. Moquin.

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**Our Voice** the spare change magazine

♦ Families, Spirituality

♦ Review of Linda Goyette's  
book Second Opinion

♦ Civic elections  
and the VLT plebiscite.

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## IN EDMONTON

# George Muskwa

BY JOHN ZAPANTIS

George has been selling Our Voice since July of 1996. He discovered the magazine through personal friends who sell it.

"The main reason I sell it is to help cover my living costs. I enjoy talking to the people I meet while I sell," says George.

"I would like to thank all of the people who support me, and especially those who stop to chat."

George can be found selling at three locations in Edmonton. He sells in front of the main downtown library on 100 Street and 102 Avenue, also 105 Street and Jasper Avenue and 104 Street and Whyte Avenue. ♦



VENDOR  
Profile

## IN CALGARY

# Ed Gorman

Ed has been selling Our Voice in Calgary for the past four years.

"I do it basically to feed myself. It helps me survive. It always has," says Ed.

"I'd really like to thank my regular customers who have supported me over the years."

You can find Ed selling at 17 Avenue and 11 Street SW, also the T.D. Square, Westbrook Mall and Brentwood Mall. ♦



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Voice

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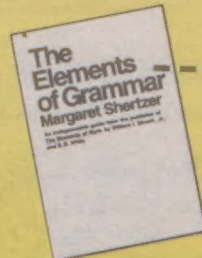
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Number \_\_\_\_\_  
Authorized by \_\_\_\_\_

### OUR VOICE VENDOR'S CODE

- I will be sober at all times while working
- I will be polite to all members of the public
- I will vend only in areas that are authorized

# LITERACY

## IN ALBERTA



Back in the late 1400s, the advent of the printing press, and the sudden availability of written word, was seized upon by reformers intent on narrowing the gap between the haves and have nots and educating the poor. Now, even with the computer age upon us, literacy is still an issue. It's pretty much a given in this life that if you're reading skills are rudimentary you're going to be working at a low level for a small amount of money. Results from the International Adult Literacy Survey show that 64% of people earning lower than \$10,000 a year have less than basic reading skills. 36% of all Albertans work at this level. In other words, they can read the TV Guide, but they can't deal with anything beyond a Harlequin Romance. Now, questions of literary taste aside, it's a much more complicated world out there than when the Italians were working on the Renaissance and the Germans were pumping out bibles. The fact of the matter is that those in charge are more likely to pay attention to you if you have better language and writing skills. It's not enough to show up expecting to do elemental labour. Today's jobs require more than just a basic literacy, and employers tend to be less likely to help out those whose skills are deficient. Thus, lack of advancement. With the nineties "downsizing" rage, those whose reading skills are lower are likely the first to go. Job prospects after that look pretty grim.

And, despite what many people think, immigrants are not the primary focus of literacy programs. 25% of immigrants to Canada test at the highest level of literacy, the highest percentage of any nation in the world. This is due to our policy of accepting professionals and investors. And literacy is not just a hot topic set up by disgruntled English teachers. There are clear proven links between lack of literacy and just about any social ill you can name. With a lack of a proper education, crime and poverty run hand and hand.

There are over three hundred programs dealing with basic education, all running on volunteers and very limited budgets.

Many people seem to have the feeling that a basic level of literacy is perfectly acceptable. Unfortunately it is not and it's simple pragmatism to work towards a highly literate society in order to compete in the world markets which are rapidly spinning beyond our grasp.

by Tom Murray

### Community Based Programs in Edmonton

**P.A.L.S -Project Adult Literacy Society**  
214 10010-105 Street  
424 5514

**The Learning Centre**  
10116-105 Street  
429-0675

**Plus Program, Edmonton John Howard Society**  
#310, 10526 Jasper Ave.  
428-7590

**Prospects Literacy Association**  
9913 108 Avenue  
421-7323

**YMCA Enterprise Center**  
10211 105 St.  
429 1991

According to Sue Hanson with the Alberta Literacy Help line, approximately one-third of Calgary's population has difficulty with reading and writing. One in seven people are at the lowest literacy level and have serious difficulty dealing with printed materials.

Sue hears many stories about employers who do not empathize with employees who have problems reading and writing. Employers, she stressed, need to be more empathetic with their workers and accepting about this issue. On the other side of the coin there are employers who want to get help for their employees and call into her office for advice.

Sue felt it very important to make it clear that not being able to read or write, is not a reflection of a person's intelligence level.

The Alberta Literacy Help Line had placed ads throughout the city - on buses, the LRT, and in the Yellow Pages as well as with various social service agencies, schools and libraries.

"For many people who call into the agency it is the first time they have admitted to anyone that they can't read or write," says Sue.

There are currently eleven literacy programs running in Calgary. Most of them rely on volunteer support.

"The majority of the programs are community and volunteer-based. They receive core funding from the Department of Advanced Education and Career Development," says Hanson.

by Kimberly Langford Fluet

### Literacy Programs in Calgary

**Bow Valley College**  
332 6Ave. S.E.  
297-4778

**The Calgary Learning Centre**  
3930-20S Street S.W.  
686-9300

**The Calgary John Howard Society**  
917-9 Ave. S.W.  
266-4566

**Keys to Success**  
1919 Sirocco Drive S.W.  
541-0277

**Mount Royal College**  
4825 Richard Rd. S.W.  
240-6872

**Calgary Urban Project Society**  
128-7 Ave. S.E.  
221-8789

**Calgary Seniors Literacy Society**  
3rd Floor, 120 17 Ave. S.W.  
263-8341

**Computer Learning and Information Centre**  
4646 Sarcce Rd. S.W.  
240-7319

**Big Brothers and Big Sisters**  
106, 2411-4th Street N.W.  
777-3533

**Alberta Mentor Foundation for Youth**  
270-3637

# LITERACY

## The importance of reading.

Melvin can't read the warning on his cigarette package.

"That's probably for the best," he jokes, but he doesn't laugh long.

Melvin was orphaned as an infant and spent his childhood in foster homes. He's been on his own since the age of thirteen.

"None of the homes I lived in were very good for learning. They were work minded people so school wasn't so important to them. One place I lived I never went to school. That was a long time ago though," Melvin says.

Melvin has had a number of jobs in his life, but they have all been labour jobs.

"I'm pretty good with a shovel. I was always the first one laid off though because I can't read or write. I quit a couple of jobs before anyone could find out about my problem. It can be pretty embarrassing. I can only get jobs where I don't have to fill out an application. I'm single and have no one to really help me with these things."

Currently Melvin is living in the single men's shelter and is looking for work. He picks up the odd job through casual labour, but has been poor all of his life.

"It makes me sad sometimes, you know I see people reading the newspaper or even billboards and I wonder what they say or what I could learn from them. It's a bad rut. I guess if I could read it would make my life a whole lot easier, but it's also frightening for a fifty year old man to learn to read after all of these years. It's pretty embarrassing to admit it to someone. I've always been afraid to make friends or meet girls. It's pretty lonely when you can't read or anything. It makes me feel like I have three heads or something when people find out. They look at you funny or they even walk away like you got the plague," Melvin says.

